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**When then 'communist bandits' formed a football team: a glimpse
of the extraordinary history of OMONOIA Nicosia.¹**

Vassilios Ioakimidis

In the evening of the 18th of May 2011 the city centre of Nicosia was taken over by thousands of jubilant Greek Cypriots, gathering from all parts of southern Cyprus. People of all ages were celebrating while waving red flags, wearing Che Guevara t-shirts and holding 'hammer and sickle' banners. The euphoric atmosphere changed when a group of young people with covered faces started throwing missiles against the central police station in the city, housed in an imposing colonial building formerly used by British imperial forces. At the same time another group of young people smashed the makeshift kiosks of the Cypriot conservative party (DYSI) and threw petrol bombs against the stalls and pre-election billboards of the ultra nationalist organization ELAM. By midnight riot police had evacuated the streets after hours of street fighting. Eighteen people were arrested, five required hospitalization, whilst the police station and several high street shops sustained serious damages.

Bearing in mind that the city centre of Nicosia is still divided by a cease fire buffer zone, patrolled by the United Nations and that the recent history of Cyprus is dominated by episodes of ethnic violence, political repression, anti-communist witch hunts and nationalist hysteria, it is not surprising that several tourists thought that they were caught in the middle of yet another episode of political or ethnic violence. To their surprise however, what they had just witnessed was the OMONOIA

¹ *I am indebted to my good friend and comrade Nicos Trimikliniotis who kindly provided me with archival information and constructive insights on the topic.*

Nicosia football club fans celebrating their team's victory in the Cyprus Cup for the thirteenth time in their history. Only four days before the parliamentary elections, the line that separated football celebration from political demonstration was blurred. In reality such a line never really existed in the history of Cypriot Football, which has always been bound to the volatile politics of the island. Even today the most discreet way to inquire about the political beliefs of a Greek Cypriot is to ask the question: "which team do you support?"

OMONIOIA FC, one of the two most popular teams on the island is the direct product of Cyprus's volatile political history and it still maintains constitutionally defined formal links with the Worker's Party of Cyprus (AKEL). The vast majority of OMONIOIA fans are supporters of the AKEL party and the 'Ultras' are vocal members of the antifascist and anti-nationalist movement in Cyprus. When OMONIOIA plays against the main rival, APOEL (the football team linked to the nationalist and right wing sections of the political spectrum), the matches routinely end in riots which shape party politics and fuel debates between the two major political parties for several weeks.

Even though there are several football clubs across Europe whose history is related to the struggles of labour movements and the working class, only in a handful of cases are progressive politics still seen as being inextricably linked to the formal mission of the club. OMONIOIA FC is definitely, one of those exceptions where politics still determine the function of the clubs at all levels. The, largely unknown, extraordinary

political history of the club has been shaped by two major historical developments which determined the modern history of island: the formation of the Communist Party of Cyprus, and the use of nationalism as a “divide and rule” tool utilized by British Colonialism. The Green line which still divides the Greek Cypriot and Turkish Cypriot Communities is a grim reminder of the impact of nationalism and colonialism in the island.

1948: The Cypriot year of discontent.

In order to understand the current division in Cyprus, one has to look to the involvement of the British Empire, which in 1878 acquired the island from the declining Ottoman Empire as part of an “exchange” for British diplomatic support provided to the Ottomans. At the time, the Greek speaking community, which constituted the vast majority of the local population, welcomed British rule, hoping for the modernization of the island and enhancement of religious rights for the Christian community. Nevertheless, it soon became clear that the British did not intend to cultivate the local economy, let alone enhance civil or religious rights. Cyprus was primarily used by the British as a military base at the crossroads of three continents. Underdevelopment, illiteracy and severe poverty continued to overwhelm the vast majority of Cypriots irrespective ethnic origin or religion. A small elite was educated by the Britons in order to run the state apparatus while most of the population lived in conditions of extreme poverty and severe exploitation. None of the social protection legislations that emerged in the UK by the end of 19th or the beginning of 20th century was transferred to the island and thus workers, many of

them minors, who worked for the British controlled industries suffered punitively harsh working conditions.

During the 1930s the widespread disappointment and disillusionment of the majority of Cypriots to British rule was channeled into two – contrasting- directions: the emergence of a nationalist anti-colonial movement (dominated by the Greek community and Christian church) and the development of a labour movement influenced by the advancing ideas of socialism (supported by workers from both communities). Anderson² suggests that London initially considered the latter much more dangerous than the former. Nevertheless, a widespread rebellion which broke out in 1931 demanding *Enosis*, unification with Greece, met a ruthless response from the British army and launched a period of tough governance by decree, which lasted until the independence of the country in 1960. The politically regressive policy of tightening the colonial grip on the island was justified cynically in the House of Commons on the basis of geo-strategic calculations. Tory Prime Minister Anthony Eden showed no reservation when he claimed that 'No Cyprus, no certain facilities to protect our supply of oil. No oil, unemployment and hunger in Britain. It is as simple as that.'³

Under these circumstances, the Communist Party of Cyprus (later renamed as AKEL) which was the only Cypriot political party at the time, was banned. Several Greek Cypriot and Turkish Cypriot members were

² Anderson P (2008) The divisions of Cyprus, London Review of Books, Vol 30, No 8 p6-7

³ *ibid* p7

arrested and deported. Despite the colonial repression and the emergence of nationalism among sections of the two communities, trade unionist continued promoting working class unity and cultivating the ideas of a socialist post-colonial society. Such grassroots work paved the way to the widespread popular agitation of the 1940's.

One of the most important chapters of this struggle was written in 1948 when the Cypriot working classes engaged in some of the most prolonged and combative industrial actions in the modern history of the island. The first strike of the year involved 2,100 miners working for the American mining company CMC. The industrial action lasted for 121 days and the main demands included better working conditions, a rise in wages and the development of social insurance legislation. Despite the violent attacks of the colonial authorities against the miners, the strike was victorious and workers succeeded in forcing the employers to introduce a 33% pay rise. The Cypriot "year of discontent" continued with the industrial actions of the asbestos workers and construction workers who fought for the creation of social security system and expansion of council housing. This time, apart from the British forces, who routinely used live ammunition against the strikers, even the local establishment and right wing groups - led by the Orthodox Church- formed an anti-strike front which was merely the prelude of the nationalist and anti-communist paramilitary groups that developed in the 1950's. Despite the orchestrated violence against the striking workers, 1948 is still considered as a watershed moment in the history of the working class in Cyprus as it offered a powerful example of class unity, beyond ethnic lines, which still inspires the efforts to

overcoming ethnic divisions and nationalist bigotry.

“Keep the communist bandits off our football pitch...”

Not accidentally, the same year (1948) is also notable because it was the year that witnessed the creation of OMONOIA football club and the permanent division of Cypriot football along political lines, several years before its split into separate ethnic leagues.

Football was initially imported to Cyprus by the British colonial elite and it was ‘cultivated’ through the English School of Nicosia- a clone of the exclusionary institution of British public schools which aimed at educating the children of British and local elite. The first football game on the island was officially recorded in 1900 when a “British team played against a team of indigenous footballers”⁴. Eventually, the new sport became popular among the local population and many local “youth and cultural associations” developed football teams as part of a broader set of activities, which not infrequently revolved around nationalist principles. The first Greek Cypriot football team was founded in 1911 in Famagusta (Anorthosis) while a Turkish Cypriot team only emerged in 1932 (Chentikaya). The necessity of the establishment of ground rules and a supervisory authority led to the creation of the Cypriot Football Federation (COP) in 1934. COP was founded by seven Greek Cypriot football teams and one Turkish Cypriot and it was largely controlled by the Greek Cypriot right wing elite.

⁴ ‘Adventures of Ideas’ special issue included in Politis newspaper, 29 April 2007, edited by Nicos Trimikliniotis

Along with the extensive working class struggles that dominated much of the political developments in 1948, Cyprus was also overshadowed by the civil war waging in Greece. Several Greek Cypriot communists had joined the war supporting Greek partisans fighting against National Forces and their Anglo-American allies. In Cyprus, the local establishment, supported by British authorities, had adopted the argument of that this war was the outcome of the rebellion of "blood thirsty communist gangs". Thus, throughout the country there was a systematic effort to suppress expressions of solidarity to the Greek partisans. Sports were not exempted from the anti-communist witch hunt and the severe oppression against 'communist sympathizers'.

In May 1948 the executive board of the Nicosia based Greek Cypriot club, APOEL, decided to send a letter of support to the Hellenic Amateur Athletics Association controlled by the right wing government of Athens. This statement grossly breached the constitution of the Cypriot club which maintain its non-political character. The letter included a blatant celebration of Greek nationalism concluding, in the final paragraph, that our Sports Club "*hopes for an end of the ethnocide mutiny*". Such terminology was widely used by the right wing to indicate that the civil war was not the outcome of political suppression and foreign intervention but it was caused by the "mutiny" of "Moscow influenced traitor bandits".

The reaction against this letter was prompt within APOEL. Five leftist footballers refused to sign the letter and vocally denounced right wing bigotry. Unsurprisingly, they faced the backlash of right wing newspapers

which stated that *"we should make clear to the five or six communist footballers who refused to sign the letter: get OUT of our stadia. You can make your own stadia and play for the Russian Football Federation. In our football pitch only the Greek minded players are allowed to play football and not the ones who support bandits"*⁵. Under pressure from the right wing press and the broader anti-communist spirit of the time, four footballers were suspended for three months and one was permanently excluded from the activities of the club.

The reaction of the leftist athletes was widely celebrated by working class and trade unionist football fans. Many football fans saw the APOEL authoritarianism a reflection of wider suppression of socialist ideas in Cyprus and decided to act in a way that respects the co-operative values of the Cypriot working class movement. In June 1948 a Nicosia Local Socialist Councillor and prominent football supporter, Dr Mattheos Papapetrou, initiated a broad meeting in support of the suspended footballers. In this meeting it was decided that the footballers should not return to APOEL but instead play for a new football club. The new football club was named OMONOIA (unity), and it was decided that the colour had to be Green as gesture of respect to the colours of EPON, the Greek communist youth association that had shone during the Greek World War two resistance against the Nazi occupation. The emblem of the new club was the Shamrock, a symbol that clearly denoted the founders' anti-British, anti-colonial sentiment. The principles of the new club reflected some of the values of the growing co-operative movement, several

⁵ 'Adventures of Ideas' special issue included in Politis newspaper, 29 April 2007, edited by Nicos Trimikliniotis

notable trade unionists were included in the first executive board. The involvement of AKEL members on the board of directors has remained constant ever since.

Within weeks of the meeting, thousands of mostly working class Greek Cypriots registered as members of OMONOIA, transforming the new “association” to the most popular football club in Cyprus. This example was followed by groups of progressive Cypriots from other regions who decided to abandon the football teams formed by the local establishment and create inclusive clubs that would oppose right wing oppression. In 1949 three more football teams were created, adopting similar values. Eventually, progressive football teams founded their own league – though it was short-lived and was dismantled in 1954 in the face of oppression from nationalist paramilitary groups.

The division of Cyprus and the ULTRAS’ reprioritization of political action.

The 1950’s was a decade characterized by the rise of the islands “two nationalisms”. On the one hand Greek Cypriot nationalism escalated its efforts for unification with Greece (Enosis), establishing a very effective anti-colonial paramilitary movement (EOKA). This movement was supported by the right-wing government in Athens which had emerged victorious from the Greek civil war. The military wing of EOKA was led by Grivas, a veteran of the Greek civil war, notorious for his involvement in the mass murder of communists in rural Greece. Grivas was very clear

that part of his struggle against British rule was the isolation and extermination of the Cypriot Left. On the other hand British authorities in an attempt to contain the growing threat of Greek Cypriot nationalism, encouraged and armed the creation of a Turkish Cypriot Paramilitary group the TMT. Turkish Cypriot nationalism developed on the basis of the idea that the two ethnic communities should be separated, thus favouring the partition of the island. A common characteristic between the two nationalist movements and their armed wings was their policy of targeting communists and trade unionists. In the peak of the ethnic conflict the Cypriot Left was the only section of the political spectrum that supported the idea of a united Cyprus independent from the 'motherlands' and imperialist powers. Such political objectives attracted a ferocious response from the nationalist paramilitary groups which resulted in the torture and assassination of several Cypriot communists.

In 1960 Cyprus gained its independence but the ethnic conflicts had already scarred Cypriot society in a way that seemed impossible to heal. Turkish Cypriots fortified themselves in enclaves and the rise of Greek Cypriot Nationalism soon took the form of a second paramilitary campaign attempting to revive the "Enosis" (unification with Greece) agenda. In the summer of 1974, a group of right wing extremists controlled and armed by the Athens military Junta attempted a coup d'état against the elected president of Cyprus. Turkey immediately intervened invading the island and occupying the Northern "half" of Cyprus. The aftermath of the short but extremely violent war of the summer of 1974 left the island divided -

politically, ideologically and geographically- into two ethnic communities, which were separated by a heavily militarized cease fire line.

The division of Cyprus radically changed the agenda of the Cypriot left which since then prioritizes the rapprochement of the two communities as the main political objective of the movement. Since the 1970's and despite the domination of nationalist rhetoric the Cypriot Left, on both sides of the dividing line, have promoted the need for the reunification and demilitarization of the island.

OMONIOIA football club, reflecting such agenda, has maintained its strong political character and its supporters have attempted to make use of football as means to challenge nationalism and encourage reunification of the two communities. As part of this campaign the OMONIOIA supporters have unofficially denounced the use of the Greek Flag (still used in several government and public buildings) and have focused on symbols of class unity.

A recent report⁶ indicated that today more than 80% of the OMONIOIA football supporters politically support AKEL and the vast majority of them consider politics as a 'highly essential' dimension of the football team's character and mission. This is particularly evident among the OMONIOIA ultras (Gate 9) who systematically participate in political mobilizations across the country. Perhaps the most central aspect of such political involvement is the engagement with the growing anti-fascist movement.

⁶ Peristianis N (1999) "Football Violence", Research Report, Intercollege, Nicosia (In Greek)

Gate 9 ultras are founding members of the "Alerta" network that brings together anti-fascist football supporters across Europe. Because of their political mission, the OMONOIA supporters face criticism from the Cypriot establishment when, in the aftermath of the re-opening of checkpoints in 2003, they started using football as a platform for rapprochement with Turkish Cypriots. The relaxation of check points meant that people from both communities were able to cross the Green Line for the first time in almost thirty years. Soon after the reopening several dozen Turkish Cypriots were invited to attend a football game of OMONOIA mixing with OMONOIA ultras and holding banners displaying the word "peace". The symbolism of such action had an important impact in Cypriot society demonstrating the willingness of the younger generation of leftist Cypriots to defy the restrictions of nationalist separation –still powerful in the island- and defend cross-community and working class unity.

The re-emergence of Greek neo-fascism and the creation of a Golden Dawn branch in Cyprus, has further crystallized OMONOIA ultras political activism. In 2011, the Ultras decided to unite with other progressive organisations and organize a summer festival which included activities, music and discussions that focused on challenging racism and fascism. During this event a space was given to Palestinian activists and the radical anti-racist organization KISA. Moreover, OMONOIA ultras decided to distribute free tickets to immigrants and encourage their involvement in the activities of the club.

When immigrants and antiracists were attacked by fascist groups in 2010, OMONOIA ultras did not hesitate in publicizing an announcement that highlighted the need for further radicalization of their members in order to defend social justice “in anyway possible”:

“A constant principle of the GATE 9 ultras is related to the struggle against racism, fascism and social divisions. The unprecedented rise of fascist attacks combined with nationalism –this incurable disease of our island!- have created a very dangerous context. At the same time, such phenomena, maximize our determination for action and reaction whenever and whichever way required!”⁷

As Cyprus is now experiencing the re-appearance of fascism and the growth of social inequality, OMONOIA supporters leave no space for misunderstanding with regards to their political commitment to the future struggles; a historical commitment which has been tested over the years and has been re-affirmed in recent times.

⁷ ULTRAS announcement 7/12/2010
http://www.gate9.com.cy/site/index.php?option=com_k2&view=item&id=57:αυακοίνωση-07/12/10&Itemid=120 (accessed 15/12/2014)